Why Do People Suffer?

✠

The Reverend Theodore P. Ferris

Why Do People Suffer?

LAST CHRISTMAS a boy about eight years old told his father and mother that the thing he wanted most for Christmas was a bicycle. They were people of modest means and could not really afford it, but because they loved their child and wanted to do everything they could for him, they got the money together and bought him the bicycle. This spring he was riding the bicycle in front of his own house and he was struck by a truck, and killed.

The parents were plunged into the deepest and most tragic kind of sorrow and grief, and the question that was on their lips constantly was, Why did it have to happen? And, why did it have to happen to *us?* Then they began to ask themselves who was to blame for what happened. And, of course, they blamed themselves at first. Perhaps, they said: — We should never have given him the bicycle, and when we did give it to him, perhaps we should not have let him ride on this street where there is so much traffic. Then they began to blame the driver; perhaps he was careless, perhaps he was driving under the influence of liquor. And then, with reverence but with real conviction, they began to blame God. How could, they said, a good God who made this boy and gave him to us let such a thing happen?

Who Is to Blame?

Now, this specific incident brings up the whole subject of suffering. There is an appalling amount of suffer-

ing in the world; mental suffering and physical suffering, and a question which every one of us asks at some time in his life is, Why do so many people suffer so much? In considering that general question, and a question which of course has been contemplated by people all through the ages, it may be more helpful if we keep to the specific incident which I have already described, and from that let our thoughts move outward toward the great fringe and margin of suffering in general.

I

Does God Punish Us This Way?

These are two easy answers to the question, Why did it have to happen?, both of which, in my judgment at least, are to be avoided at all costs. The first is, God sent the suffering as a punishment for sin. That is the answer that most of the writers of the Old Testament would give. The only way they could understand suffering was to say that it was a sign of the divine displeasure, just as a child, when he suffers at the hand of his parents, assumes that the parent is displeased with him. It is only when he grows up that he begins to see that sometimes there is suffering in the family which the parent has nothing to do with and could not prevent. When he is little, if things go against him, he takes it for granted that his parents have gone against him. And so, when Job was suffering the tortures of the damned, his friends represented that conventional point of view and said, "Whoever perished being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?" And the Psalmist said, "I have been

young and now am old; yet have I never seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." According to them, people who obeyed God's law, did His will, prospered and did not suffer, and those who broke His law and did not obey His will did suffer as a penalty for their disobedience.

In this case, you ask, Who sinned? Certainly, the boy eight years old had done nothing serious enough to deserve death. The parents, of course, have sinned as all human beings have, but as I know them they are good, honest, tender-hearted parents who would have done anything for their child. And the truck driver, as we all came to know him, was a decent sort of person; not a perfect person, but certainly not a man who would ever do anything like that if he could possibly have avoided it. The people who say that God sent the suffering as a punishment for sin would say, If there is no apparent sin, then there is some secret sin that is being punished, something hidden under the surface that the parents, or the child, or the truck driver, are not aware of, and this terrible infliction of suffering, pain and grief is the penalty that they are bearing for their secret sin.

There is something in that answer, for it is true, isn't it, that when men and women break the laws of God they suffer in consequence? If a man jumps off a high building, he suffers the consequences. If one class of society oppresses another class unjustly, ultimately it will suffer the consequences of a bloody revolution and rebellion. And so, in this case, you might say that up to a point this answer is valid and that this accident is the

consequence of our human thirst for speed and sensationalism, and excitement and machinery and pleasure represented by the bicycle that the boy wanted.

But that is as far as this answer goes. We all know, if we have made any careful observations at all, that suffering as we see it in the world is not distributed according to a person's sin or according to his goodness. Some of the worst sinners in the world suffer the least, and some of the world's greatest saints suffer the most. And so we set aside this Old Testament answer as inadequate. It is easy, it would be nice if it were true, but it does not cover the situation, for suffering as we know it is distributed among people regardless of whether they are good or bad, and the theory that suffering is always a sign of the displeasure of the divine is discarded.

Is Suffering Real, or Only an Illusion?

There is a second answer that is easy and likewise unsatisfactory, and that is that the people themselves are responsible for the suffering because of their misunderstanding of the event itself. According to this point of view, the boy did not really suffer, for suffering is not a part of God, and it is only man's mistaken judgment and understanding in which there is any suffering. It is as though a child woke up in the night screaming, told his mother that he was in a house that was burning and that he could not get out of his room, and his mother said, Why, don't be silly, there is no fire; that is just a dream. The boy's agony would be the result of his illusion, and so some people would say

in this case that the boy did not really suffer, nor did the parents; the boy didn't even really die, for there is no reality in sickness or suffering or death; it is only a seeming reality in our human minds. Now that, you recognize instantly, is the answer that the Christian Scientists would give to the problem of suffering, and again, there is something in it. For when we approach life fearfully, apprehensively, we are in error and we *do* suffer. And when we approach it confidently, we are not in error, and we are strong and free to go about our way. But I, for one, cannot believe that suffering which is so universal in human experience and so much a part of the whole created order can be all attributed to human error. I cannot believe that all the events which weigh the hearts and minds and spirits of men down into the very depths can be dispensed with as unreal illusions of the human mind, that they find no place within the orbit of God's activity, and that they are all the result of human error. That answer, like the first one, is too easy to be true: it does not tally either with the facts of life or with the insights of great minds and spirits.

II

People Are Free to Make Choices

What, then, can we say? First of all, we can say that God did not cause the accident, but He allowed it to happen. At any rate, He did nothing to prevent it. Why? Perhaps the parents themselves are a clue as to why God did nothing to prevent it. In one sense, they too could have prevented it. They could have said to the

boy when he wanted the bicycle, Now if you have a bicycle you will be exposed to danger; therefore, we are not going to give you a bicycle; we are going to keep you protected in order to preserve your life. No sensible parent would do that. Why? Because he wants his child to grow up, and even though he be exposed to danger, and even though his life sometimes be risked, he is willing to accept those dangers and those risks as the price of maturity, growth and independence of his child. God, I suppose, could have made a universe in which there would have been no accidents like this, no undeserved suffering; He could have said, I will not let my creatures suffer, I will not expose them to danger, I will not let them run risks, I will keep them fenced in by my loving care. He did not do it, and we may presume that He did not do it for the same reason that the parents did not do it, because He wanted men and women to be both free and good. And if He had decided to interfere in all such instances as this to protect them and to spare them from all harm they would be neither free nor good, for when goodness is rewarded by protection and insurance against harm, it ceases to be goodness and becomes expedience.

One of the most illuminating and penetrating lines in the New Testament, and one which all suffering parents and all grief-stricken people should remember, is the line, "God spared not His own son." He would rather deliver him up for us all, and let him go through the pain of rejection and death, than have a world of men and women who were not free to develop and grow and run risks and liabilities, than have men and women who were

no longer good because they were paid for being good. God did not cause this accident, but certainly He allowed it to happen and to that extent, it falls within the orbit of His divine activity.

The second thing we can say is this: God not only allowed the accident to happen, but He used it, and in this case He used it in very striking and obvious ways. The father and mother in this family, for one reason or another, had never been very closely knit together. They were good people, but they had never been as some husbands and wives are, working together as one flesh. As a result of the grief that overtook them both, those two people were drawn together in a union such as they never dreamed possible before. Another thing happened. They were both Church people and they went to Church quite regularly, but as a result of that accident they began to plumb the depths of the reality of God. They had worshipped God rather automatically and in a routine way on Sundays, but they now began to get down on their knees and ask God to show them His way, and Himself. And it would be hard to find two persons who have grown more rapidly in the grace and in the knowledge of God than those two have since that accident happened. But another thing happened. They were kindly people, and they were interested in the neighbors on their street, but as a result of that accident their sympathy began to expand. It seems now as you see them that they

Suffering Can Help Us to Grow in the Knowledge of God

take in the suffering of the whole world. Anything they see in the newspaper, any instance of undeserved suffering, is their suffering. They go out to everybody, to help and to heal in any way that they can. And in still another way God used that accident. As we watched the driver of the truck, we saw him become more careful, a more responsible person, more concerned about children and the people who are on the highways. This is no answer to why it happened, we are only saying that once God allowed it to happen, He has used it for good.

And we go on to make this general observation that will apply in your case and in mine, that suffering can always be handled in such a way as to make it creative. It is not creative automatically; it can embitter you and shrivel your spirit; but if you approach it in the spirit in which this couple approached it, and in which God approached the suffering of His son on the cross, it can become creative and perhaps save not only you, but the whole world.

God's Love and Care Continue After Death for Those We Love

One other thing we can say. This is harder to say, and makes greater demand on your religious faith, but certainly we would not want to leave this subject on the low levels of rationality. We can say that God did not let the innocent sufferer go. The natural thing for you to say as you are thinking about this specific incident is, Now it is all very well to say the parents grew in the knowledge of God; the truck driver became a better

person; but what about the poor child? He is dead! We believe that God did not let him go. Jesus, I suppose, had the greatest understanding and penetration into these mysteries of anyone who ever lived. Do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount, when he was talking about the birds of the air and their freedom and their trust in God, and how God took care of them, he did not say, God never lets anything happen to the birds. He said, "Not one sparrow falleth to the ground *without your heavenly father.*" They do fall, and we fall, tragically sometimes, and inexplicably sometimes, but not without our heavenly father. This child was not outside his parents' love and care, and if there can be within the created order of things a love and a care that would not let that child go, even though the years go by and the past be almost forgotten, how can there be a God from whom all of us come with our instincts and our affections and our loves who would let one innocent sufferer go? We know not what lies beyond the death of such a person, but we believe that he does not fall to the ground without his heavenly father.

III

These things we can say, but when all is said and done, we do not really know why it happened, and I am recommending to you a modest amount of agnosticism in matters like this. There are some religious people who can bear with no uncertainty. I believe they are on the wrong track. I do not believe that we are meant in this life to have absolute certainty. There are many things we do

not know. We do not know why we were born in the twentieth century instead of the twelfth, but we were. We do not know why this earth is so indescribably beautiful, but it is. We do not know why human beings can be so angelic and so devilish at the same time, but they are. We do not know why there is so much joy in life, but there is. Likewise, we do not know why there is so much suffering in life, but there is. We may know sometime, but we do not know now.

Our question, then, might be revised, at least after the shock of an experience like this has passed, and instead of asking, Why did this happen to me?, my suggestion is that we ask, How can I handle it so that it will become creative and not destructive? I do not know why it happened, but it has happened, and I want to deal with it in such a way as to weave it into the creative fabric of life and make it part of the splendor of the pattern of God's purpose for all people, as Jesus wove the Cross into the very pattern of existence.

Make the Experience Creative, Not Destructive

You can always begin by trusting the loved one to God. If your heart aches, can the heart of God be hard? You can continue by trying not to become yourself a blanket of gloom over those who are around you, and you can go out to help somebody else who has trouble greater than your own.

Someone several years ago, meditating on these things, as millions have meditated on them through the years, wrote anonymously in the *British Weekly* these lines:

" The cry of man's anguish went up unto God:
'Lord, take away pain —
The shadow that darkens the world thou hast made,
The close-coiling chain
That strangles the heart, the burden that weighs
On wings that would soar —
Lord, take away pain from the world thou hast made,
That it love thee the more.'

" Then answered the Lord to the cry of his world:
'Shall I take away pain,
And with it the power of the soul to endure,
Made strong by the strain?
Shall I take away pity that knits heart to heart,
And sacrifice high?
Will ye lose all your heroes that lift from the fire
White brows to the sky?
Shall I take away love, that redeems with a price
And smiles at its loss?
Can ye spare from your lives, that would climb unto mine,
The Christ on his Cross?' "

* * * * *

Keep us humble, O God, before these great mysteries of life. Grant that we may never be satisfied with easy answers, but rather be willing to ride the storms of life, trusting in thine own over-arching care and power. When there seems to be no answer to our cry, help us to go on bravely from day to day, to do the thing that is to be done at the time, trusting that in the end we will see no longer through a glass darkly, but face to face.

Amen.

Additional copies may be obtained from the

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICE
1 JOY STREET, BOSTON 8, MASSACHUSETTS